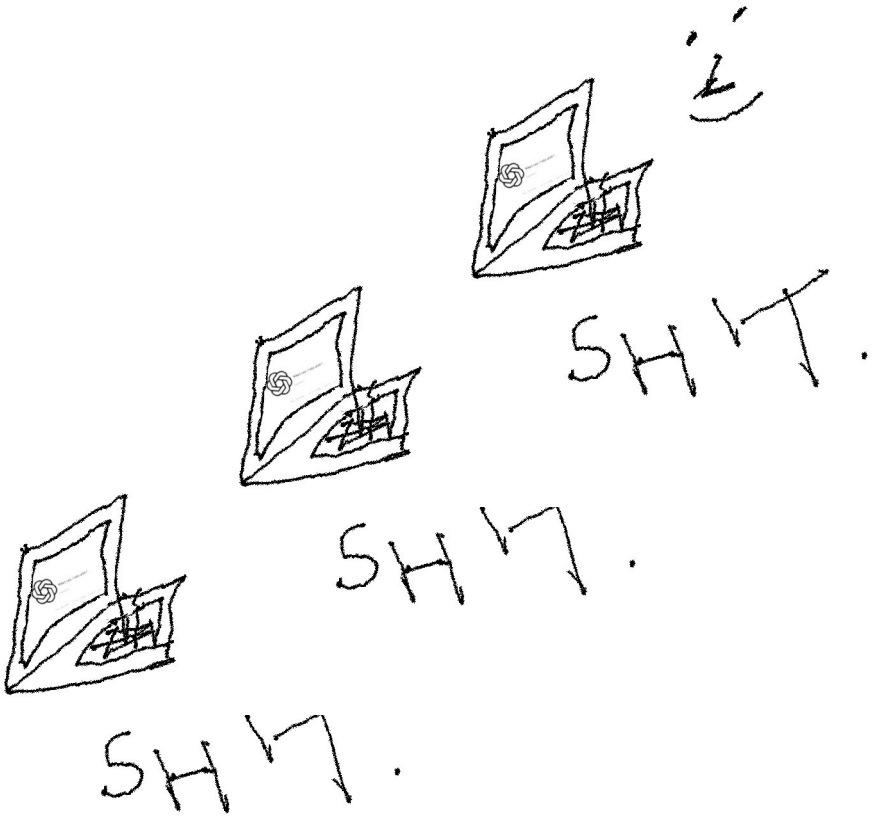


Locked In With The Widget

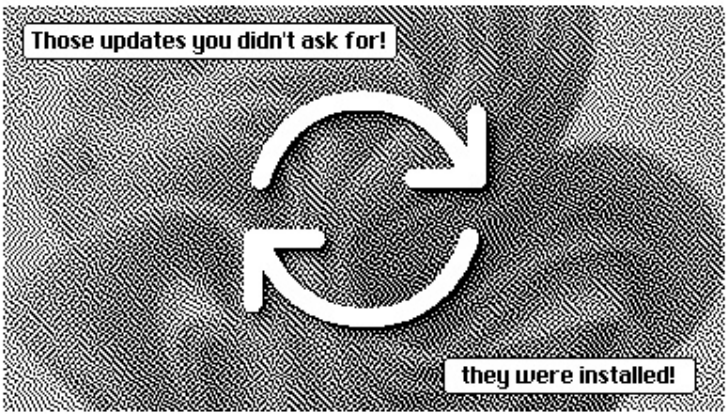
a zine about (loss of) control.

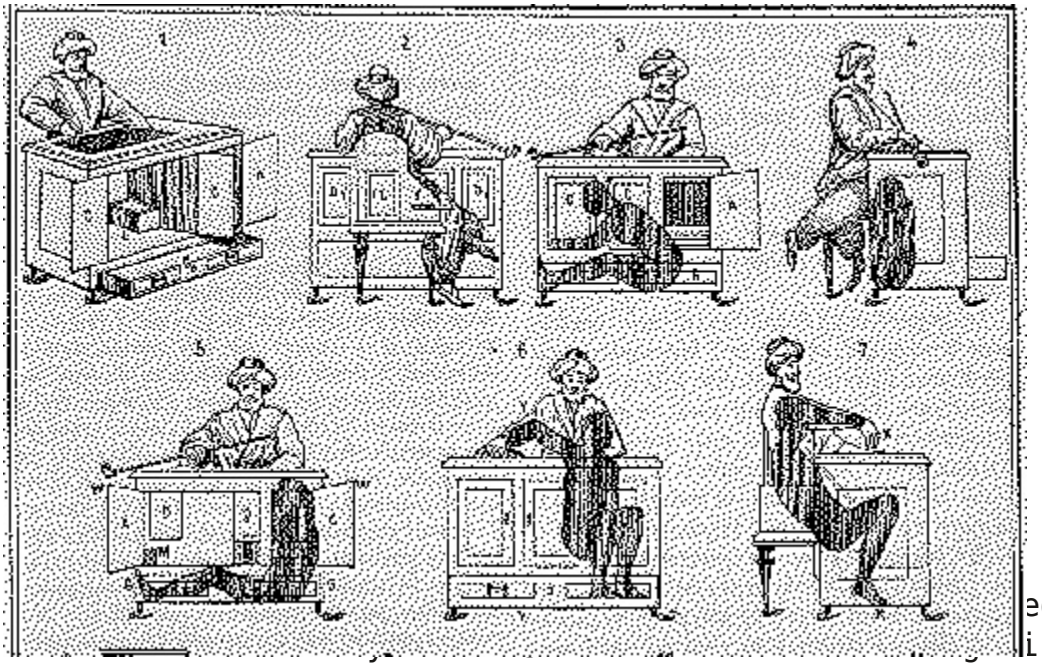
You're so very tired this morning. You grab for a mug from the office kitchen cabinet blindly, check the inside to make sure its clean, then push the top of the carafe to dispense the hot liquid up to the brim of it.

Trudging to your seat, you take a sip. You realize you can barely taste much of any distinct flavor, besides a burnt lingering, but you mostly just need it to get through the morning.

At your cubicle desk your designated work laptop hits you with the glow of the corporate logo when you accidentally knock your USB mouse a bit with the mug. This causes you to kind of shudder.

Upon logging in, the operating system tells you those updates you downloaded were installed and your machine was rebooted. Except you didn't ask it to do any of this. You take a minute to think if you saved all of your work before leaving for home yesterday.





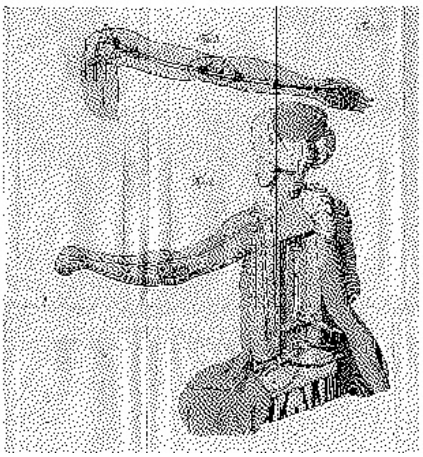
You ope

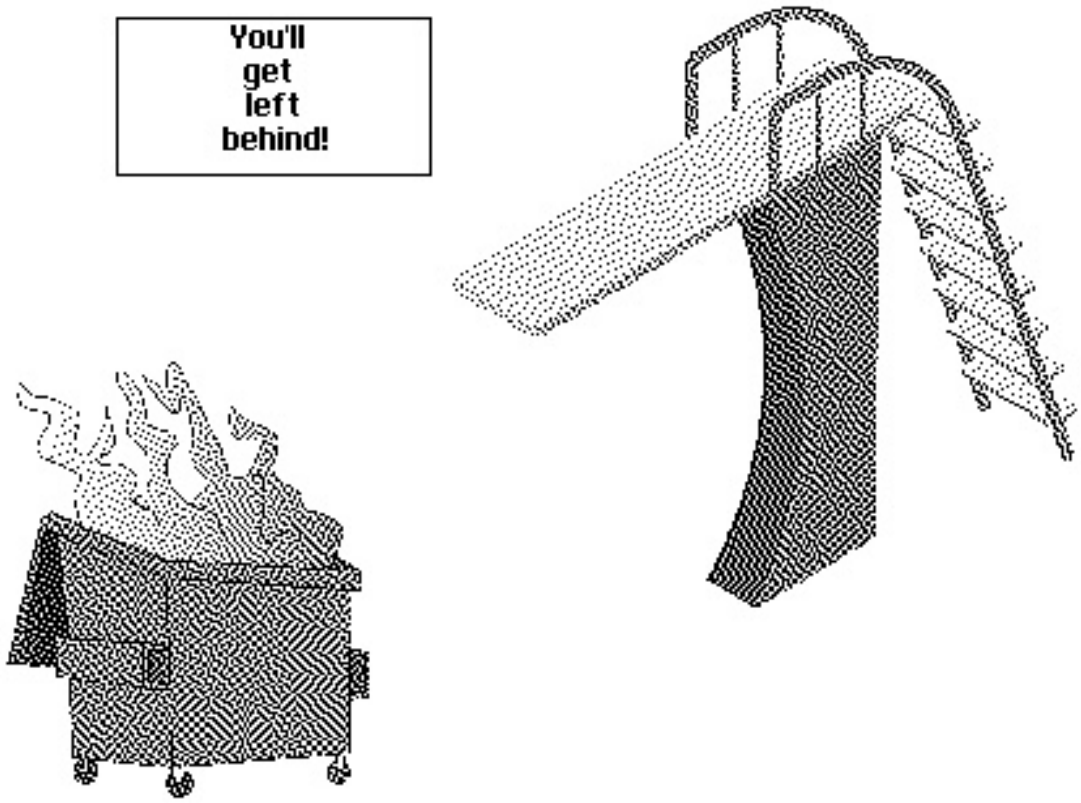
When yo ed your notes i irectory and realize there are a bunch of **.md** files with names of AI companies on them. Oh no. Where did these come from?

You ALT+TAB and mouse back to you start menu to open the web browser you have been using for the past five years. You go to open a new private tab, but when you do, you realize the tab you open has a little robot animation and opens up a prompt to speak with an "AI Agent".

After almost choking on your coffee, you go back to the menu you just accessed to _actually_ open the private window. You realize the dropdown has changed, and your muscle memory has been fucked with - the fourth option down, previously "open a new private window", has been replaced with "open a new AI window". You notice the option you wanted is also a bit lower in the listing now.

You get up and go take a piss.



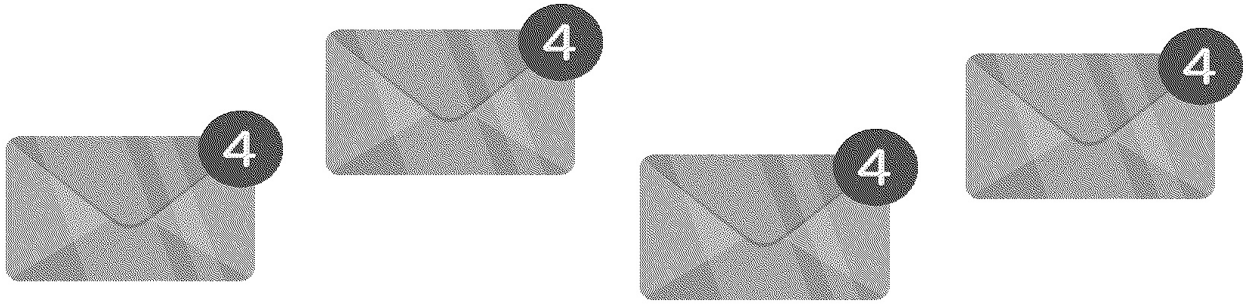


Some guy you've never seen in the office is on his phone at the urinal. Gross. Rambling on about something something "this is the future, whether we like it or not, so we need to embrace it or get left behind in the dust."

You wash your hands and hurry away with some paper towels, deciding to dry them on the way back to your desk.

One of you coworkers at the desk sitting next to you pops up to say a member of IT Support was looking for you, but that they would just send you an email. You nod to them, and utter "thanks" as you seep back into your chair and toss the paper towlels into the trash bin at the corner of your workspace. You miss, but decide to just leave it there on the floor for now.

Unlocking your user profile again on the work machine, you open your email. Latest is from Janet - she is asking you how large a particular file is, wondering what the best system to use is for sending it to the third party that is requesting it. You don't remember where the file is saved, so you start thrusting yourself around some familiar looking subfolders in your file manager GUI.



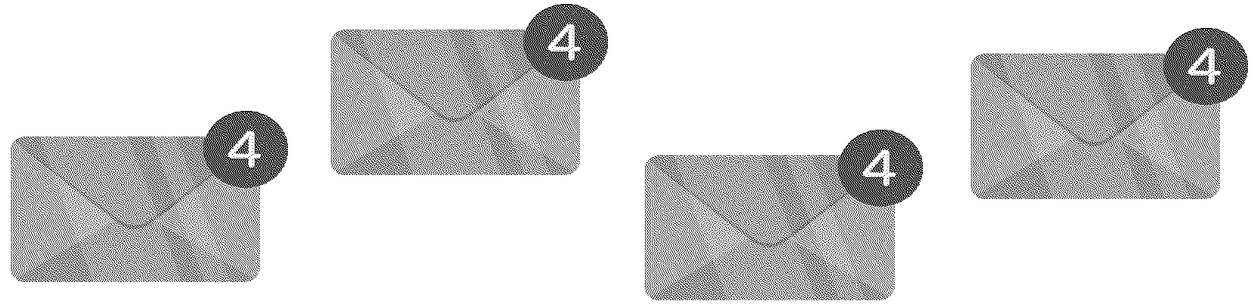
You find it, and right-click to get the filesize info, since you are already there. When you do, you realize something new is trying to load in the dropdown menu - a spinning wheel next to a bunch of new options. They all say "Get file data from AI" and have "Loading..." next to them. Seems to be taking forever.

You grimace, but keep going, getting the filesize and sending the info back to Janet in a reply to her original email.

The next email in your inbox, first one sent out this morning, is from Brett, the IT Manager. Subject: "Need info on automation run ASAP"

You open it, and you see a screenshot - it is from the Project Management Platform the company uses: an automation that you configured way back. It has been somehow converted to use the "AI ENTERPRISE" solution that was included in the pricing for the recent renewal for this service. In doing so, it looks like it has taken your relatively simple automation and added processing from a Large Language Model, which has somehow malfunctioned and the two runs it made yesterday charged 1.3 million tokens consumed for this service. Which leaves a negative balance on the account and effectively stops any other automations from running.

You feel a heat against your entire face and a tightness in the chest.



Immediately replying to Brett, you apologize and mention you have no idea how this could have happened, but you will be getting to the bottom of it.

You find the Account Manager's information in an old email, after swatting away all of the "smart filters" and forcing the web client for your mailbox to order things to be searched in chronological order.

You forward this email to Amanda, the Account Manager, asking her how this could have happened, and that you would please like to know as soon as possible and also have this fixed so that others can use the service properly.

You don't feel like having coffee anymore.

You decide it might be best go talk to Brett in person, so you head over to the corner office.

When you arrive you knock on the door. Brett opens it up. He sits back down at his workstation in the back part of the small office. You remember now, seeing him lurched over his computer, how much he looks like a praying mantis.

He tells you "just a sec." as he types furiously on his keyboard. You can tell its a buckling spring model.

There is a heavy scent of cigarette smoke in the room.. you can't tell if Brett just got back from a smoke break or if he has been doing that in here somehow, and not cracking the window open enough.

"Right," he pivots, "so this AI Enterprise cost.."

You apologize and say there must have been a mistake, that you've reached out to them to get an answer as to why this happened. He tells you he believes you, which you think is in earnest, and he mentions that he will disable the automation for you until this gets straightened out. You thank him.

Before you think of leaving, you notice the desk next to him, where his partner used to sit, is completely empty. Cleaned off. You ask him what the deal is with that.

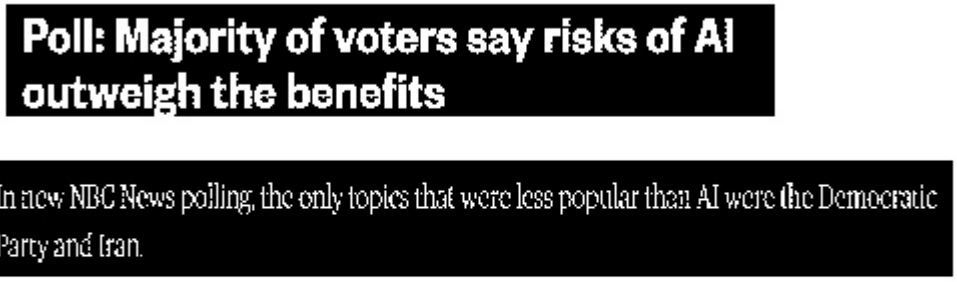
"Oh.. yeah, Deepak was laid off yesterday.. nothing personal, and wasn't my decision, to be clear. Higher ups, you know. To be honest, and you didn't hear this from me, but a bunch of Infrastructure people will be next as well.."

You leave with an awkward wave.

You're really not in the mood to get back to your desk now. On a morning where you felt like you didn't have the energy for a decent output in the first place, you now feel like you have been thrust into some kind of void, where you are feeling your way around for anything worth grasping, no sense of direction nor vision.

You stop by the lunch room. There are a few people there, one of them on their phone with their feet kicked up on a table, scrolling through something on it. Another having a late breakfast.

The TV is on. Its one of the 24hr conglomerate networks. It is showing footage of the recent military escalation by the U.S. and Israel in Iran. They are reporting that a school has been struck by American bombs. There are rumours that an AI company was used to target this facility,


Poll: Majority of voters say risks of AI outweigh the benefits
In new NBC News polling, the only topics that were less popular than AI were the Democratic Party and Iran.

You feel a bit sick to your stomach now. So you go back to the kitchen to make some tea. You mix a big glob of honey into it.

You try and sit back at your desk and focus on work, but it feels helpless. Your mind is spinning and the tea isn't helping.

You send a message to your boss and let them know you are not feeling well and that you are going to leave early. He responds with "ok."

You catch the next train home. Within the train car you find yourself eventually seated within, you see shiny new advertisments lining the sides near the ceiling: "automate your customer service today with our state of the art AI Bot tech! Its like you're talking to a real person!" One of them looks like it was defaced, so that it reads "[SPRAYPAINT]] talk [SPRAYPAINT] to a real person!"

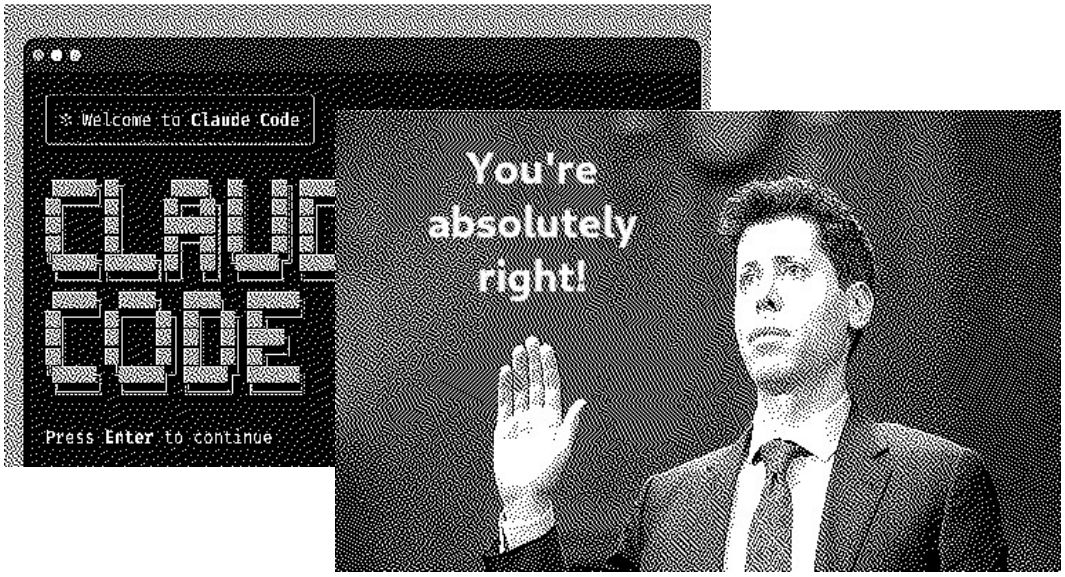
You get off at your stop and briskly walk home, hoping to take some medicine, browse through comforting and mundane nonsense on your laptop, and pass out on your warm couch. When you get through your apartment door, you start another cup of tea and flip open your old thinkpad, loaded with a linux operating system that you've carefully cutomized to your liking. You go to grab your tea and a blanket, and come back to the boot screen displaying this as its final line:

Kernel panic - not syncing: Attempted to kill init! exitcode=0x00000009

It has been quite a nasty day already, so you hap-hazardly search the error on a few different search engine. The problem is a lot of the top results are AI generated sites that ramble on with both false or intentonally misleading solutions.

This smells like a RAM problem though. So with a deep sigh, you go to grab your screwdriver kit, unscrew and detach the bottom of the RAM, reseat the memory stick, and start the thing back on with the bottom still opened, letting it whir up on the coffee table adjacent to the couch. Same error.

So it's maybe a hardware issue. Damn. You know you seated the thing properly. So you look on a few sites from RAM prices. It just so happens that the prices of memory, even something like 8GB for this model, have gone up astronomically due to the fact that AI companies have bought out the stock of so many of them and inflated the prices. They're not even using the RAM in their datacenters, it's 'just in case'.



Screwing your laptop back up in anger, you suddenly hear a gentle scraping noise, which gives you pause. It sounds like it's coming from the door.

You take a moment in the dim light to realize that it is a piece of paper that has been slid under the door. You just sit there for a moment, zoning out, and then finally get up to go check it out.

It looks like an 8 by 11 inch standard sheet of white paper folded in half. You bring it back to the couch and unfold it.

Its a letter. It opens with a "Dear tenant," - must be from the landlord.

You go on to read about how rent is going to increase starting next month, due to the cost of ameneties and also "physical and digital improvements in the complex that you will be able to take advantage of in the near future!"

It is signed by the landlord and ends with an image of a couple holding each other close near the fence of an apartment complex, one of them giving a thumbs up. The image is clearly AI-generated - you can tell because the arm of the woman embracing the man who is giving the thumbs up contains six fingers.

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It doesn't have intellect, but it will continue to be referred to as something having this, in an anthropomorphized manner.

It can't do things effectively with easy reversability or anticipation of debt or disaster, but it is already taking your job. In one way, or another.

It has no actual experience. It cannot possibly have that, on anything near a human level.

You do.

And your experiences shape you, inside and out.

What will you do with them?

This short zine was created on a 16-year-old laptop running Devuan [1] Linux. I mostly used Scribus [2] to write this. For images, I used Decker [3] with Gimp [4]. The silly subpar hand-drawn doodles were done on a Wacom tablet within Gimp as well.

Much of the copy here has been influenced by real world experiences.

Go talk with others about regaining control of your digital and social life.

Go touch grass.

[1] https://www.devuan.org/

[2] https://www.scribus.net/

[3] https://beyondloom.com/decker/

[4] https://www.gimp.org/

~~~ J.A., 2026 ~~~
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SAM ALTMAN: "We see a future where intelligence is a utility, like electricity or water, and people buy it from us on a meter."

36:08